

## Deracinated Americans

It was a late night in the small-town pizzeria, and the owners were sitting at our table drinking the Antinori Chianti *riserva* that was “too sour” for the local Swedes, who prefer Lambrusco on the rocks when they are not drinking Miller Lite. The husband had come from Italy as a child, but his wife was an authentic “SaudaRoccafoda” Italian, who had grown up in the shadow of “St. Anthony’s” steeple. She was telling me stories, similar to what I had heard from other exiles, about the old neighborhood.

Growing up, she had known practically everyone, had navigated the complicated networks of kin and marriage that connected the houses and streets of South Rockford more securely than telephone lines and water mains could ever do. On hot summer afternoons, she and the other children had sucked on the *granite* they bought at the Italian market, and her family, when it was not dining at home or in the houses of uncles and cousins, had gone out to Maria’s for the famous pizza and the more famous steaks. If you were well connected, you could order dishes that never appeared on the menu. You had to know—and be known. This was the turf of Illinois Rep. Zeke Giorgi—“Uncle Zeke” literally to hundreds, and figuratively to thousands, of Rockford Italians.

Their part of South Rockford had been, like so many Italian immigrant neighborhoods, a community unto itself, and other ethnic groups were well-advised not to penetrate too deeply into the Sicilian heartland. The gangs left St. Anthony’s and Maria’s alone, if they knew what was good for them, and despite (or, rather, because of) the presence of at least one of the five families, the neighborhood was a bastion of safety for the residents. But the close-knit fabric of Italian community life quickly began to unravel in the 1960’s. The despised Italians, whom the Anglos and Swedes had kept out of jobs on the East Side, were graduating from college and earning legal and medical degrees; they owned businesses and were making good money. South Rockford began to feel like the Italian ghetto; the suburbs represented the America that no Italian had discovered.

And, even if they wanted to stay, the civil-rights movement was making it difficult to maintain the frontier. Only a bigot would object to diversity, they were told, but, in their hearts, they knew that only unnatural parents would want to rear their children in an atmosphere polluted by drugs, violence, and crime.

“We all lived together in those days,” she explained, and she and her sisters could walk across the street to see their grandmother or down the block to visit aunts and uncles. “We had everything to make us happy, and yet we left it all—for what?—or let ourselves get driven out by the gangs. We thought we were moving up into a better world for our children. In fact, we lost everything.” Now, to appreciate South Rockford, you have to look at the photography displays at the Festa Italiana or attend an event sponsored by the Columbus Day Committee, which is valiantly trying to keep alive a sense of Italian heritage.

Naive conservatives (not just the conservatives who shill for developers) speak of the suburbs as the fulfillment of the American dream, but, for most people, they were a *cul de sac* where all traditions of community were destroyed. Now we live in a country of suburbanites who do not have the faintest conception of what life might have been like in places like South Rockford or the Polish East End of Superior, Wisconsin, or old Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina. They do not know what they are missing, but they miss it, nonetheless. Man is not born to live among faceless people who barricade themselves to watch TV in houses picked out of a developer’s plan book. Man must find meaning in everything he does, or else he goes mad or dies. Too many Americans are turning into the living dead, more terrifyingly dead than the creatures of George Romero’s tawdry nightmares.

A community is not a suburban house that can be built on spec and sold to a young couple who view it as a tax write-off to be resold as soon as their combined incomes make it possible to trade up. If a man is eager to trade up the family home, why should he be reluctant, once he is making the money, to trade up his wife

and family?

Christians quite properly loathed King Henry VIII as a philandering adulterer, but if Henry had the good fortune to live in California, his serial monogamy would be regarded as proof of his attachment to the institution of marriage. A man might dally, when he is young, and still make a good husband, but a man who has lived with a series of women, in or out of wedlock, can never be true to any woman. He has seen too much, done too much, and we who have lived in too many towns and fixed up too many houses and fit into too many new groups can never be fully loyal. In the back of our minds, we know we can always move on if things do not work out as we had hoped.

A community is not a mirage that keeps on disappearing over the horizon; it is more like a home, “the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in,” as Robert Frost says, the place “one somehow doesn’t have to deserve.” If we are among the lucky few in modern America, we are born into a community. If we are not, we may fall into one by accident and may even, after long residence, be accepted as resident aliens, especially after our children are born in the village. “Your children will belong here,” a friend told me in McClellanville, South Carolina (population, perhaps, 500), “but you never will.” That was a year before we moved to a place to which neither I nor my children will ever quite belong.

Community means, primarily, a commonality, a place and a people who live and work together, where children are born and play in the shadow of their ancestors’ tombstones. Members of a community accept one another, warts and all, much as parents are willing to endure their ne’er-do-well children (sometimes preferring them to more successful but less dependent offspring), so long as they are loyal to the family. A community is not made up of individuals who “choose” to live in a place that suits their fancy but of families who are part of the common life, whether they want to be or not. I remember a couple who had left our village to avoid some gossip, but after a few

years had passed and the stories had faded into the background, they moved back and picked up their end of the threads that were inextricably tangled in the common skein.

A society, on the other hand, does consist of individuals (usually men) who have banded together to pursue some purpose, even if that purpose is only a pleasure. Football teams, joint stock companies, and political parties are societies that compete for excellence and success. Jesuits belong to a society, while the members of a church parish or congregation form a community. The confounding of society and community is no mere semantic mistake. If communities are a natural growth, then they cannot be constructed or imposed. Utopian socialist experiments all foundered on this rock: the attempt to impose the community's rule of love upon members of a society who had gathered together to work on a project. The ultimate confusion is reached by politicians who redefine the nation as a theoretical abstraction, as Lincoln did when he declared America a nation "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." It is not simply that Lincoln's proposition is either trivial or counterfactual but that the concept of propositional nationhood is a contradiction in terms, a paradoxical invitation to the total state.

A national community cannot be invented overnight or in a single generation. Like the followers of Aeneas or the colonists who first came to the New World, the children of Israel, whom Moses led out of Egypt, were not yet a nation, and so long as they were dedicated to a project—reaching the Promised Land—they could not form a genuine community. Their nostrils still recalled the fleshpots of Egypt, and their necks were too stiff to endure the gentle yoke of their God, Who condemned them, as punishment for trusting the ten faithless spies, to wander for 40 years. The decades in the wilderness forged the bonds of community among their children, and the older generation of Egyptian Jews had to pass away before their children could take possession of the Promised Land. The fathers had formed a society, a company of adventure and exploration of the type that settled Virginia, but only their children could live within a community.

The community of Jews was, in fact, a congeries of a dozen self-governing tribes, within which the most solid com-

munities were extended families. The deeper unity of Israel was expressed by their religion, by their worship of the same God, and, when they succeeded in forming an actual nation, the unity of that nation was represented by the temple, which David (like Moses) could conceive but not bring to fruition.

The Jews did not hold on to the Promised Land for ever. They were subjugated and dispersed by the empires of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and finally (under Vespasian) the Romans, and they became, in Christian myth, the Wandering Jew, condemned to roam the earth in punishment for his mistreatment of Jesus on the way to Calvary.

For many European Jews, across the centuries of exile, the dream of return remained alive, and they began returning to Turkish-held Palestine in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some settlers of Israel had religious motivations, while others were utopian revolutionaries, devoted as much to Marx as to Moses, who dreamed of creating a new kind of community, without distinctions of wealth and property, where marriage was a rational contract between liberated individuals and children were raised in common.

The *kibbutz* was an impossible experiment and not an authentic community. Communities are made of families, after all, and the *kibbutz* represents a denial of the family, an ideological project not much different from the societies imposed by communist parties between 1917 and 1990. Such people could never have a community, much less a nation, but their children and their children's children, falling away from the utopian dreams, were turning into the new children of Israel, people with roots in the land, whose children grew up not in the land that their remote ancestors had left 2,000 years ago, but in a land where their parents and grandparents had lived and died and shed their blood.

During the same period in which some Jews refounded a community in the Middle East, their once-Christian neighbors in Europe and, especially, in America were following in the footsteps of the Wandering Jew. In popular mythology, Americans have always been a race of Daniel Boones and Huck Finns, forever pulling up stakes and lighting out for the territories. But most Americans stayed put or left only under the pressure of necessity. Even for pioneers, the goal was not the move itself (a terrible hardship, especially for the women) but some

place where they could put down roots and leave their bones.

That conservative side of the American character has disappeared in my lifetime. I have lived, by the standards of my countrymen, a comparatively sedentary life, but by the time I reached the age of 40, I had lived in six states and in ten separate towns and over twice that many houses (to say nothing of apartments). Mine, however, has been a static existence compared to that of my wife, an Air Force brat, who has lived in ten states and two foreign countries.

People who have moved several times can never be at home anywhere, no matter what lies they tell themselves about "my very good friend Lars Johnson" (whom they met only last month at the Lutheran "Brats for Brats" benefit for legally challenged adolescents). Friends are not made that easily, except the kind of "friends" it will be no pain to lose when we move on. And we do keep moving on and do not understand why other people refuse to budge. Send the Palestinians to Jordan—what difference will it make? They are all Arabs. Why not give the Israelis New Jersey, and see if they can make that desert bloom? Send the Krajina Serbs to Kosovo and then to Bosnia, ship the Catholics south out of Ulster . . . after all, the globe is shrinking, Europe has one currency, and English or Esperanto is perfectly adequate for international commerce.

And yet, although we do not know what we are missing, we miss it, nonetheless, and shed tears over *A Trip to Bountiful* and *Cinema Paradiso*. Americans are almost obsessed with genealogy and spend time and money (as I have done) tracing some ne'er-do-well ancestor who came from a wide spot in the road like Castle Island in County Kerry. The sense of ancestry that we are trying to recover is the temporal dimension of the sense of community for which we thirst, like Tantalus, without ever being able to slake the thirst. Tantalus is punished eternally for the crime of killing his own son and serving him to the gods, just as his descendant Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter for the sake of his expedition against Troy. In our quest for success, how many of us American fathers have done the same, uprooting our families in order to pursue careers, severing connections with friends and relatives, denying our children the fundamental human need to live within a community?